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Room S-1037D / (212) 963-6842 // Fax: 963-6914

NGO Resource Centre, Room S-101 / (212) 963-7234 New York, N.Y. 10017, USA

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A Commemoration of the End of the United Nations Decade of Disabled Persons and the 25th Anniversary of the Special Olympics International

(Not an official record or press release. This summary is made available to NGO representatives for their information and free dissemination).

On 15 October 1992, **Ms. Inez Wyngaarde-Mahajan**, Disabled Affairs Officer, Centre for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs, United Nations Office at Vienna; **Mr. George Smith**, Director of Sports Training and Education, Special Olympics International and; **Ms. Rachel Hurst**, Project Director of Disability Awareness in Action briefed NGO representatives on the progress made in addressing the concerns of disabled persons and the need for further action.

Ms. Inez Wyngaarde-Mahajan said the United Nations Office at Vienna was the focal point within the United Nations system for disability matters. The Centre coordinated the World Programme of Action concerning Disabled Persons, adopted by the General Assembly in December 1982. The programme of action shifted away from a charity approach towards empowerment of disabled persons. The General Assembly had proclaimed 1983 to 1992 as the United Nations Decade of Disabled Persons, to encourage policy-makers, planners, legislators and others to adopt enlightened disability policies and to provide a time-frame for the initial implementation of the World Programme of Action. The World Programme was a global strategy to prevent disability, enhance rehabilitation and provide for the full participation of persons with disabilities in social life and development. It explicitly recognized the right of all human beings to equality of opportunities, in effect extending the concept of human rights.

Number of disabled has increased

Despite progress in health care and rehabilitation in some countries, the number of disabled persons had increased during the Decade, especially in war-stricken areas and those affected by famine. Approximately 10 per cent of the world population had one or more disabilities. About 160 million were women and another 140 million were children. It was estimated that 300 million people with disabilities lived in developing countries, only one per cent of whom had access to basic health, education, and adequate sanitation services. These numbers would increase as world population and the number of armed conflicts escalated.

The main achievement of the Decade had been increased public awareness of disability issues. Many new organizations of disabled persons had been formed and strengthened. At the national level, disability issues were being included in censuses and household surveys. Statistical information on

disability, which in 1960 was available in only 15 countries, was now available in over 55. The Centre was promoting information exchange by organizing annual consultative meetings with non-governmental organizations. In addition, the Centre was establishing a Clearing-house Database on Disability-related Information and helping to develop policy guidelines and manuals on equalization of opportunities, among other subjects.

Need for national coordination

Unfortunately, many of the national coordinating committees established during the International Year of Disabled Persons (1981) were disbanded at the end of the Year. National coordinating mechanisms were vital for policy development and implementation. In 1990, the United Nations established guidelines for assisting and encouraging national coordination. The draft Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Disabled Persons was a long-term plan which should help Governments and organizations to develop national action plans to help equalize opportunities and to support independent living.

Special Olympics: providing opportunities for the disabled

Mr. **George Smith** said that the Special Olympics was founded in 1967 by Eunice Kennedy Shriver, after she had conducted a survey of opportunities for disabled persons in the United States, at the request of her brother, President John F. Kennedy. The objective of Special Olympics was to use sports as a way for communities to include people with mental retardation and other disabilities. Sports could be used to change public opinion about people with disabilities and to influence public policy.

Special Olympics and similar organizations used several methods to encourage society to be more inclusive of people with disabilities. They provided training on an individual basis so that people with disabilities could have the requisite skills to participate meaningfully alongside people without disabilities. The same rules and venues used for sports in community competitions were used in sporting events for the disabled. Under the Special Olympics Unified Sports programme, people without disabilities were placed on the same team as disabled athletes who shared the same level of skill. Special Olympics drew disabled athletes from 120 countries, who participated in 25 sports. Children as young as five years old trained for the Special Olympics, while the oldest athletes were over ninety.

Mr. Smith expressed concern for low birth weight and for narcotic drug abuse among pregnant mothers--leading causes of mental retardation.

He concluded by stating that he was honoured that his supervisor at Special Olympics was a disabled person.

Human rights, not charity

Ms. Rachel Hurst said Disability Awareness in Action (DAA) was a joint initiative by several international NGOs supporting the Decade of Disabled Persons, who sought to raise awareness of disability issues. DAA met the need for a coordinated mechanism to address goverments and the general public.

Ms. Hurst said the Secretary-General's message that disability policy had moved from charity to to a question of human rights, had to be spread to the international community. The common image of

disabled people as either "tragic but brave" or "super-heros surmounting every obstacle" had to be transformed to the reality of their potential as fully participating citizens.

DAA had been active in trying to get this message across. It had provided organizations of disabled people with practical information, such as how to work with the media. It had organized contacts between disabled people's organizations and governments. DAA had also encouraged disabled people around the world to write about their lives. Over 500 letters from disabled people in 26 countries--mostly developing countries--had been collected and sent to Heads of State for signature.

DAA had a small workforce of four people, who used the existing network of NGOs "to ignite a fire of activity and political action". Several speeches during the special plenary session of the General Assembly on 12 October 1992, held to commemorate the end of the Decade of Disabled Persons, reflected increased awareness of the disabled.

Ms. Hurst said that the DAA's experience and resources would be valuable in commemorating the International Day of Disabled Persons (3 December), proclaimed at the forty-seventh session of the General Assembly. "We must ensure that this International Day is not a day of standing at street corners collecting charity for outcasts, but is a day in support of the human rights for disabled people."